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Chapter Three

When Rock Becomes Fire: Heart-centred Work and the Holy Ground of Teaching

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> Hello, sun in my face. Hello, you who made the morning and spread it over the fields. . .
>
> Watch, now, how I start the day in happiness, in kindness. – Mary Oliver, 'Why I Wake Early'

The Myth of Sisyphus

When I review my vocation as a Christian educator, a poem, and an extract from an essay written by the fourth Poet Laureate to the Library of Congress (1897–1970), have accompanied me throughout this three-decade journey. These literary excerpts, anchored to printed paper and secured by magnets, have humanised various filing cabinets standing next to my desk in secondary school classrooms and remain writ large on a pin board in my current office where I work as a tertiary lecturer.

The first excerpt is from Marg Piercy's poem entitled 'To Be of Use'. She writes:

> I love people who harness themselves, an ox to a heavy cart,
> who pull like water buffalo, with massive patience,
> who strain in the mud and the muck to move things forward,
> who do what has to be done, again and again. (1982, p.106)

Perhaps this serves as an enduring reminder of the value of collegial teamwork needed for the enterprise of teaching; that 'doing what needs to be done' is unstainable if one is trying to work alone. Perhaps, too, and after many years of knowing this to be true, there is no tangible arrival point for a teacher. While there are rewards, milestones and epiphanies along the way – both for our students and ourselves – ostensibly, the work of an educator, despite the innovation and creativity informing our praxis, requires much repetition and doing 'what has to be done, again and again'. I will introduce the essay extract later as it is the immediate idea of the 'again and again' nature of educators' work that I want to explore a little further here. There are some days when this repetition of tasks in a professional context might trigger a train of questions, such as: *Why* do we do what we do? Is such repetition motivating or de-energising? Is it missional or mundane? Are ongoing tasks too much? Are we enough? Is what we are doing serving the greater good? The greater God?

These questions are not necessarily new ones for those working for faith-based organisations oriented towards helping others. And, these were some of the questions introduced to me thirty years ago when completing my Bachelor of Education degree with a major in literature. One memorable text rehearsed the challenging questions at that time, and still invites me to grapple with its existential aporia today. Albert Camus wrote the *Myth of Sisyphus* in the form of a philosophical essay in 1942, and this wrestling with human existence and perceived absurdity forms the locus of his inquiry. I can still remember the cover of the book – a stooped Sisyphus pushes an oversized boulder while ascending a steep hill. It always seemed an insurmountable task and I never felt confident that he would make it to the top with the same speed the reader might have in reaching the end of the book. Camus drew on Sisyphus, a figure from Greek mythology, to typify what he saw as this tireless quest to create meaning, and from his own perspective, to endure this undertaking in a world without God.

To understand Camus' use of synecdoche, we might briefly review the Greek myth from which he draws his human archetype. Essentially, a redacted version of the myth sees Sisyphus defying the gods and putting Death in chains, which means no human will need to die. Ultimately, though, Death is liberated, and when it comes time for Sisyphus to die he uses his cunning to escape from the underworld.

When the gods finally capture him, they decide on a punishment that will last for all eternity, and his retribution involves manoeuvring a sizeable rock up a hill. However, when he reaches the top of the incline, the rock rolls down leaving Sisyphus burdened by a tiring task requiring a perpetual starting over. *Again, and again.*

His plight has also captured the imagination of visual artists, and in a painting by Titan (1549) called 'Sisyphus' we see a dark palette shadowing this mythological figure signifying that human endeavour is laborious, futile and repetitious. We also find this classic influence shaping modern culture where street art by Interensi Kaski depicts a contemporised Sisyphean myth on the side of a building in Ukraine. In this context, the rock the human figure pushes now represents cumulative materialism, capitalism, and things a consumer might endlessly pursue driven by a sense of intransigent deficit where 'more will never be enough'.

Making a general application to a professional context, perhaps it is not hard to think about some of the Sisyphean tasks in education where the needs of many not-for-profit organisations typically exceed available resourcing. Those working in such conditions could readily name what rocks, such as daily routines and expectations, keep exceeding labour and arrival. Furthermore, most could pose the perennial question of how can educators deal with the forever-uncompleted action when to-do lists recycle as re-do lists?

To Live and Create Amidst the Desert

In the preface of his essay Camus writes, 'Although "The Myth of Sisyphus" poses mortal problems, it sums itself up for me as a lucid invitation to live and to create, in the very midst of the desert' (1991, p.V). For the writer, though life consists of a series of mundane tasks, he sees some regenerative possibility through the act of creativity. The poet Mary Oliver also contemplates the tension between the routine functionality of work tasks and the creativity needed to complete other awe-inspiring activities. In an essay entitled 'Of Power and Time' she acknowledges the need for the kind of labour which completes ordinary and necessary jobs:

Say you have bought a ticket on an airplane and you intend to fly from New York to San Francisco. What do you ask of the pilot when

you climb aboard and take your seat next to the little window, which you cannot open but through which you see the dizzying heights to which you are lifted from the secure and friendly earth?

Most assuredly you want the pilot to be his regular and ordinary self. You want him to approach and undertake his work with no more than a calm pleasure. You want nothing fancy, nothing new. You ask him to do, routinely, what he knows how to do — fly an airplane. You hope he will not daydream. You hope he will not drift into some interesting meander of thought. You want this flight to be ordinary, not extraordinary. So, too, with the surgeon, and the ambulance driver, and the captain of the ship. Let all of them work, as ordinarily they do, in confident familiarity with whatever the work requires, and no more. Their ordinariness is the surety of the world. Their ordinariness makes the world go round. (2016 p. 25-26)

As Christian educators it might be easy to forget that sometimes it is the 'ordinariness' that provides essential structured routines that facilitate students' learning and familiarisation with the real world. This contribution of core business, of landing the curriculum plane, might be minimised at times because 'we live in a time where the work of teachers is being evaluated in more and more detail' (Näring, Vlerick & Van de Ven, 2012, p.69). Increasingly, researchers are becoming more interested in the association between job burnout, self-efficacy and coping, and teachers' well-being (Lauermann & König, 2016; Shoji, Cieslak, Smoktunowicz, Rogala, Benight & Luszczynska, 2016; Subon, & Macdonald, 2016).

Burnout and the Cost of Caring

The early pioneering research of Christina Maslach and Michael Leiter highlights that burnout can develop through personal and chronic stress in work environments (1997). They offer an insight into why they believe burnout has been increasing:

> It's not something that has gone wrong with us but rather that there have been fundamental changes in the workplace and nature of our jobs. The workplace today is a cold, hostile, demanding environment, both economically and psychologically. People are emotionally, physically, and spiritually exhausted. The daily demands of the job, the family, and everything in between erode their energy and enthusiasm. The joy of success and the thrill

> of achievement are more and more difficult to attain. Dedication and commitment to the job are fading. People are becoming cynical, keeping their distance, trying not to let themselves get too involved. (1997, p.1)

Maslach further investigates this exhaustion in her later work *Burnout: The Cost of Caring* where she begins the book referencing two candid reflections from her interviews with professionals working in the helping professions. The first is a powerful testimony from a social worker called Carol B:

> When I try to describe my experience to someone else, I use the analogy of a teapot. Just like a teapot, I was on the fire, with boiling water–working hard to handle problems and do good. But after several years, the water had boiled away, and yet I was still on the fire–a burned out teapot in danger of cracking. (2003, p.1)

This potent analogy of the expended and empty self is further underscored by the researcher's interview with a teacher called Jim Y where he offers another analogy:

> A teacher can be compared to a battery. At the beginning of the year, all the students are plugged in and drawing learning current. At the end of the school year, the battery is worn down and must be re-charged. And each time the battery is re-charged it is more difficult for it to hold its charge, and eventually it must be replaced. That is when complete burnout has taken place (2003, p.1).

As Maslach explains, and this is exemplified in both Carol's and Jim's frank accounts, 'Burnout is a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment that can occur among individuals who do "people work" of some kind' (2003, p.2). Importantly, and critically relevant for educators, is the observation that 'what is unique about burnout is that the stress arises from *social* interaction between helper and recipient' (Maslach, 2003, p.2). As teachers, much of the working day involves *social* interaction and the emotional demands of being present to others. Sometimes, when attending to the repeated demands and speed of human interaction, a teacher may not always sense or hear a divine presence seeking to provide spiritual support, or the invitation to re-connect and re-align our work with a sacred calling.

Working on Holy Ground

Leaving for a moment Sisyphus rolling his rock, Camus philosophically wrangling with how an artist can create in the midst of a metaphorical desert, and the teacher whose battery needs re-charging, I will reflect on another kind of invitation someone else received in the Old Testament. In Exodus chapter three, the reader finds Moses, himself in exile, going about his ordinary work routine, but then something extraordinary happens:

> 3 Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the far side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. 2 There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up. 3 So Moses thought, "I will go over and see this strange sight—why the bush does not burn up." 4 When the Lord saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, "Moses! Moses!" And Moses said, "Here I am." 5 "Do not come any closer," God said. "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are *standing is holy ground*." (Exodus 3:1-5 NIV)

Unlike Camus' secularised Sisyphus, Moses is 'standing on holy ground.' Here in this wilderness a dialogue with God transforms the role of a shepherd. Through this encounter Moses (and the reader) discovers ordinary work to be awe-inspiring when it becomes part of a missional calling.

When comparing Sisyphus' fate with Moses' invitation, the unyielding rock can become an energising and sustaining fire when God calls us for a purpose: a movement from the isolation of individual toil to a community of shared vision. Hopelessness is transposed to holiness. As Christian educators, when God calls us to work for Him, we might re-imagine the perfunctory as part of a deeper place of purpose.

In thinking about what it might mean to stand on holy ground in a professional context, there is a core text Dr Drene Somasundrum and I draw on in a unit called 'Spiritual and Cultural Care', which we teach for first year nursing students. In *Spirituality in Nursing: Standing on Holy Ground* Mary O'Brien writes:

> When the nurse clinician, nurse educator, nurse administrator, or nurse researcher [or teacher] stands before a patient, a student, a staff member… God is also present and the ground on which [we] are standing is holy ground. For it is here, in the act of serving a brother or sister in need, that [we] truly encounter God. God is present in [our] practice of caring just as surely as he was present in the blessed meeting with Moses so many centuries ago. (2017, p.1)

To explain what taking off one's shoes might mean, O'Brien quotes from spiritual writer Marcina Wiederkehr who shares 'that it means stripping away "whatever prevents us from experiencing the holy"' (2017, p.7). She is highlighting here that what makes nursing work holy is the act of serving, and the same is true of teaching. O'Brien is inviting professionals to participate in a theology of care. One of the dimensions of O'Brien's theology of care involves the dimension of listening with our heart, ears and mind (2017). I want to suggest in educational contexts that listening to our colleagues, students and ourselves is one of the vital ways in which our work, and our encounters, might be transformed from the mundane to the meaningful.

While studying for a doctoral degree at the University of Sydney, I had the privilege of attending a training course on reclaiming awe and generous listening with Dr Rachel Remen. She explored the ways in which hearing each other's stories provide refuge and strength, and affirm that our lives are purposeful and connected. Central to her work as a pioneer of integrative medicine, Dr Remen promotes 'generous listening' as a way of humanising and sustaining our professional lives as we serve others. Her ethos is exemplified in her best-selling books *My Grandfather's Blessings* and *Kitchen Table Wisdom*, though some may also be familiar with her innovative 'The Healer's Art' course which is offered in the first and second year of medical degrees across America. She recounts in detail what happens in this learning space:

> As students are preparing to break into small groups to share their personal stories of vulnerability, loss and healing; a basket filled with small, fuzzy, multi-colored "feely hearts" is passed around the room. Each little heart is handmade and no two are alike. Students are invited to take one and carry it with them as a reminder to hold their own hearts and the hearts of their patients and colleagues tenderly.

> These hearts are made by local volunteers, for each one of the 1500 or more beginning students who take the The Healer's Art class every year. Over the years, we have heard many moving "feely heart" stories as students nationwide carry their feely hearts in their pockets throughout medical school and out into the world of medicine. Doctors have loaned their feely hearts to their patients in times of need and shared them with their own students. They have taken them into their churches where the women's auxiliary has made them for those who grieve. On many occasions after I have given a talk to the medical society or a hospital in some far-flung city, a middle aged woman or man who I have never met before has pulled a threadbare feely heart from the pocket of an expensive suit and told me that they have carried it with them for years. Perhaps your doctor carries one too. (2011, par.2-3)

The conversation she describes with one of her students is most powerful: **'**I asked a first-year medical student at UCSF what he had learned in the Healer's Art course. Without hesitation he replied "I learned I can heal with my humanity things I can never cure with my science"' (2011, par.4).

Students Who Stand on Holy Ground

Like the personal and professional enrichment Remen receives when her medical students share their humanity with patients, there are interactions with students that educators experience which provide shared moments of sustaining joy (Karjalainen, Hanhimäki & Puroila, 2019). Recounting moments from teaching contexts where we witness a healing humanity through the actions of our students may remind us that our work is more than simple routine; we become more aware that teaching is a vocation that promotes and enables ethical practice (Schwarz, 1999).

One such encounter offered me a profound gift while I was going about the scheduled task of playground supervision. I had recently started work at a new school and could see the high school boys crowding on the asphalt to play hand ball at recess time. It seemed like a strange choice to be in a congested area when a lush oval was only metres away, so I said to one of the year nine students in the long line, 'Why don't you play on the grass?'

His reply was sincere and final: ‘It’s too holy miss; you can only go on there if you’ve made it onto the rugby or cricket firsts teams. . . that’s not us.’ I did not have long to process the perceived inequity of resources because a small crowd of students of all year groups had begun to gather under a tree. As I approached the group wondering if a fight might be breaking out, I could see the attraction was a baby bird which had fallen out of its nest from the tallest tree in the school. The curiosity of the young men was becoming a morbid spectacle as the mother’s and baby’s cries became more distressed with no possible way to re-unite them.

Then, inexplicably, one student started chanting ‘kill, kill, kill’ while a menacing circle started to form around the injured bird. The chilling death cry taking on the hostile tones of a gladiatorial sport remind me of a scene from *Lord of the Flies* where peer behaviour inhibits common decency. I was just about to restore some crowd control when one of my year eight English students stepped forward: ‘I would like to help the bird.’

‘Thank you, Tom’ I said as he instinctively knelt down in the dust to cradle the injured bird.

‘Move back please boys, this is sacred space. A mother has lost her baby’ came my intuitive assistance. I watched as Tom took his tailored blazer, laying it in the dust, while tenderly wrapping the small bundle amongst the school motto on the pocket.

‘May I please take the bird to get help?’ he said.

The bell had just rung so we began walking towards the office with the once menacing circle of students now becoming a guard of honour who somehow recognised the decency of a peer. My HSC English students would soon be waiting so I checked with Tom whether he would like me to ask a tutor to accompany him and the bird to the office?

‘No’, he said, ‘I can care for the bird.’ There was a long silence before he said ‘Miss, do you think this bird will die?’

‘I’m not sure Tom, it has injuries from falling, but we’re doing our best here’ is all I could offer.

‘Miss, do you think the mother bird heard what was being called out?’ Another long silence before I reflected: ‘Do you know what the

mother bird, the students and I will remember most? That you listened with your heart and you stepped forward with care and courage.'

Sometimes there are students who stand on ground much holier than the school oval.

While Christian educators have a commitment to respond to students 'with compassion and hope and to shepherd [them] toward personal and communal transformation in light of the triune God' (Edie, 2012, p. 24), some of the holiest moments occur when students take off their shoes, step out of the circle and live with engaged compassion. When I think of Tom's intervention, his deep kindness modelled in a hostile place, I am reminded of Rabbi Rosove's poem 'A Pure Soul-A Poem of Moses':

> God said
> 'Moses – I choose you
> Because you are soft
> Because you weep
> Because your heart is burdened and worried
> Because you know this world's cruelty
> And you have not become cruel
> Nor do you stand idly by.' (2012)

When teachers witness the incarnated Christ within and beyond the classroom, there is a renewal and reassurance that the 'bush does not always burn up', or inevitably burn out.

Role and Soul of Heart-Centred Work

In a journal article entitled 'Significant Work Is About Self-Realization and Broader Purpose: Defining the Key Dimensions of Meaningful Work' Martela Frank and Anne B. Pessi contend that 'if we are able to provide people with work where they can realize themselves and where they feel they are serving a broader purpose, we give people the opportunity to truly feel that their work is significant and worth doing' (2018, p.12). The difference between the task of Sisyphus and the divine call of Moses is the value of the work and its connection to a broader spiritual purpose. Ellen White further illuminates the purpose of a Christ-filled life in her observation that 'From the beginning God has wrought through His people to bring

blessing to the world… Everyone in whose heart Christ abides, everyone who will show forth His love to the world, is a worker together with God for the blessing of humanity' (2019, p.13.2). Those who are called to the ministry of teaching typically want their work to bless and transform lives. Marilyn Cochran-Smith's editorial 'Sometimes it's not about the money: teaching and heart' conveys this deeper sense of calling:

> I have been a teacher educator for more than 25 years and have now worked or consulted with teacher education programs and institutions that span the continent. Over these years, I have asked hundreds of would-be teachers why they wanted to teach. Never once … did a prospective teacher say that he or she wanted to be part of an efficient organization with a strong profitability margin. To the contrary, the explanation I heard most often was that people became teachers because they wanted to make a difference, they wanted to change the world, or they wanted to help improve the human condition. (2003, p. 374)

Teaching provides the opportunity for Christian educators to have soul and role in alignment. In his research on reflective practice, Michael Paterson describes soul this way: 'by soul, I mean a person's motivational impulse; what makes them tick; what gets them out of bed in the morning; the fire in their belly that provides meaning and purpose; the inner drive to contribute to the common good' (2019, p.15). He offers valuable questions to help explore whether professional setting enables human flourishing and generosity: 'How do your soul and role fare at work? How do the requirements of your role sit with your deepest values? How does your context inhibit or release you for others?' (Paterson, 2019, p.16).

Such questions now help shape and update my rationale for teaching. They are important questions because the answers lead to the kind of sacred work Brené Brown affirms in her research on daring classrooms:

> Teachers are the guardians of spaces that allow students to breathe and be curious and explore the world and be who they are without suffocation. Students deserve one place where they can rumble with vulnerability and their hearts can exhale. And what I know from the research is that we should never underestimate the benefit to a child of having a place to belong—even one—where they can take off their armor. It can and often does change the trajectory of their life. (2019, par. 1-2)

Regularly returning to and re-focusing on this kind of *intentionality* for student-centred care may provide a counterbalance to the endless tasks that seem, at times, more bureaucratic than pastoral. As Coleman notes:

> For most people, purpose is built not found. Working with a sense of purpose day-in and day-out is an act of will that takes thoughtfulness and practice… Teachers can see every day the young lives they are shaping—and visualize the lasting impact they may have on the young lives they touch. (Coleman, 2017 par.2 & par.5)

'Working with that sense of purpose day-in and day-out' is not simply an act of will, it is also a way of thinking and being that involves the kind of generous listening described by Rachel Remen, and the engaged compassion modelled by Tom. To sustain a sense of calling is to see work as both generative and recuperative.

In returning to the second extract written by the fourth Poet Laureate to the Library of Congress (1897–1970), I find a way of thinking which has motivated me as a Christian educator for the past thirty years, and formed the opening lines of my first teaching philosophy statement as a young graduate. In an essay entitled 'The Heart and the Lyre' (1947) Louise Bogan reflects on her profession and purpose as a poet**:** 'in a time lacking in truth and certainty and filled with anguish and despair, no woman should be shamefaced in attempting to give back to the world, through her work, a portion of its lost heart' (1947, par.11).

To work towards restoration not only describes the creative impulse of the poet, but also embodies the pastoral work of educators and Jesus' sustaining promise found in Ezekiel 36:26 (NIV): 'I will give you a new heart and will put a new spirit in you *[the awe of the burning bush and the divine encounter];* I will remove from you your heart of *[Sisyphean]* stone and give you a heart of flesh *[the holy blessing of serving].'*

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